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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether black students attending predominantly white colleges attributed their academic difficulties to different sources and saw themselves as having a different set of problems than their black counterparts in predominantly black colleges. Subjects were asked to rate possible sources of academic problems on 12 five-point scales. The total of 289 students was divided between 195 black students in four predominantly black universities and 94 black students in five predominantly white liberal arts colleges. There were 98 males and 97 females in the black schools, and 51 males and 43 females in the white schools. Males attending predominantly black colleges were more inclined to attribute their academic difficulties to their own poor study habits and to worry over financial problems, and less likely than those attending predominantly white colleges to blame their difficulties on defects in their schools. Students attending predominantly white colleges were more likely to see competition with other students and inadequate high school preparation as sources of academic difficulties. Female students were inclined to view social and communication problems as contributing most importantly to their academic difficulties, while males more frequently reported being distracted by financial problems or experiencing academic difficulties because of poor study habits. (Author/JM)

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Differences in Perceived Sources Of Academic Difficulties: Black Students In Predominantly Black and Predominantly White Colleges

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One hundred and ninety-five black students in predominantly black colleges were asked to rate twelve sources of academic difficulties and to rank the three most important sources. Significant differences were found between students attending the two types of schools on competition, high school preparation, communications with instructors, campus social and intellectual atmosphere, and advisement. Blacks attending black colleges ranked poor study habits, finances, and communications problems with instructors as most serious problems; those in white colleges ranked inadequate social life and high school preparation as most serious.

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DIFFERENCES IN PERCEIVED SOURCES OF ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES: BLACK STUDENTS IN PREDOMINANTLY BLACK AND PREDOMINANTLY WHITE COLLEGES

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Few, if any, students go through college without experiencing some academic difficulties: inadequacies in some phases of their high school preparation, difficulties in communicating with or understanding their instructors, shortcomings in the instructional program of the college or their own less than efficient study habits. In some cases the difficulties are motivational; students are unable to see any connection between their courses and their own lives, the competition with other students overwhelms them, or their own families offer them little encouragement or psychological support. Other problems may be less central yet still affect academic performance: financial worries, a lack of friends or an unsatisfying social life.

Students may, of course, misperceive the sources of their academic difficulties. Lack of success may be blamed on instructors and the instructional program rather than on personal inadequacies or a lack of appropriate preparation. Social difficulties may assume exaggerated proportions or students may convince themselves that they would do much better scholastically if they had no financial problems or were encouraged

more by their families. Nevertheless, any of these problems can serve to detract from optimal performance, and an imagined problem can distract quite as effectively as a real one.

Black students attending college presumably have their full quota of problems, and those attending predominantly white colleges may have additional problems beyond those of the typical white students or the black student attending a predominantly black college. It has been rather generally assumed that their high school preparation on the average has been less adequate, that white instructors have difficulty in understanding and communicating with them, that the white educational system is less appropriate to their needs and that they experience greater social isolation. The purpose of this study was to determine whether black students attending predominantly white colleges attributed their academic difficulties to different sources and saw themselves as having a different set of problems than their black counterparts in predominantly black colleges.

Method

Questionnaire

Subjects were asked to rate possible sources of academic problems on the following twelve scales:

Insert Figure 1 about here

Subjects

The total of 289 subjects was divided between 195 black students in four predominantly black universities and 94 black students in five predominantly white liberal arts colleges. There were 98 males and 97

females in the black schools, and 51 males and 43 females in the white schools.

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered during class periods by the regular instructors and were answered anonymously. Students indicated their class year, approximate GPA, sex, and major. The following directions appeared on the first sheet of the questionnaire.

Directions:

> Even the best students from time to time experience some degree of academic difficulty in at least some of their studies. There are probably a great many causes of these difficulties. On the items listed below, will you indicate the degree to which you think each factor may be related to any academic problems you may have experienced. Do this by circling one of the numbers on the scale for each item. If you have any questions about answering a particular item, please raise your hand. All answers are confidential. DO NOT sign your name to this questionnaire.

A final section of the questionnaire asked Ss to select the three most serious problems in order, selecting them from the twelve scaled items and one additional item, "other personal problems."

An ANOVA was used with each of the twelve questionnaire scales to identify the significant sources of variance and their interactions. Each ANOVA included sex and school; the third source of variance was GPA or major, depending upon the scale being analyzed. Differences between subgroups in their rankings of problems by relative importance was determined by Chi-squares.

Results

Competition

Students at predominantly white schools rated competition with other students as a factor in their academic difficulties more frequently ($p<.05$) than did students attending predominantly black schools (Table 1) There were no significant differences by sex or major and no interaction effects among these three variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

High School Preparation

The severity of the competition a student encounters may be a function, in part, of his high school preparation. Or a student may judge the adequacy of his high school preparation in terms of his ability to meet competition in college. As Table 2 indicates, black students in predominantly white schools rated their high school preparation as less adequate than did students in predominantly black schools ($p<.05$).

Insert Table 2 about here

Study Habits

One might expect students' perceptions of their study habits to be related to their feelings about competition and high school preparation, but no significant differences were found between students attending the two different types of schools, perhaps because poor study habits appear to be a common and important problem for so many students. (See Table 3.) Although female students generally gave themselves higher ratings in

their study habits than did males ($p<.05$), male students majoring in the humanities, natural sciences, and behavioral sciences rated their study habits higher than did females with the same majors ($p<.05$).

Insert Table 3 about here

Communication Problems

As Table 4 indicates, communications with instructors were rated significantly poorer by students in predominantly white colleges ($p<.05$), the poorest ratings being given by female students in these schools. Males in predominantly white colleges reported poorer communications than did either males or females in predominantly black colleges. This last group, females attending predominantly black colleges, reported the fewest communications' problems ($p<.05$).

Insert Table 4 about here

Educational Relevance

If, as students frequently state, the lack of relevance of their courses reduces their motivation for academic success, black students at predominantly white colleges should experience more difficulty than those at predominantly black schools. Courses were rated significantly less relevant ($p<.01$) at the white schools. The Newman-Keuls posttest indicated that students in predominantly white colleges majoring in the humanities, natural sciences and behavioral sciences rated their courses as more relevant than did those who had not chosen a major or who were majoring in education or the social sciences. However, both male and female students in predominantly black colleges with majors in education, the social sciences or no

chosen major rated their courses as more relevant than did students in predominantly white colleges regardless of their major ($p<.01$). Females with majors in the humanities, natural sciences or behavioral sciences rated their courses more relevant than did males with the same majors or females majoring in education and the social sciences or with no major ($p<.05$).

Insert Table 5 about here

Campus Atmosphere--General

When asked to rate the atmosphere of their campus as very unfriendly, cold and hostile or, at the other extreme, as very friendly with cooperative, interested students, students in predominantly black colleges rated campus atmosphere significantly more favorably ($p<.01$) than did students in predominantly white colleges. Female students generally reported a more friendly campus atmosphere (.05).

Insert Table 6 about here

Social Life

Differences significant at the .01 level were found between predominantly black and predominantly white schools when students were asked to rate the adequacy of their social life, with predominantly black campuses receiving the more favorable ratings. Female students at both types of schools rated their social life as more adequate than did male students ($p<.05$).

Insert Table 7 about here

Intellectual Atmosphere, Quality of Instruction, Advisement and Counseling

In the ANOVAs for these three categories, class year replaced academic major since students' judgments in these areas might be expected to change with experience in the college environment, with increased familiarity with college and with instructors, and with changes in the types of problems they encountered. Only on the ratings on the adequacy of counseling and advisement services were significant differences found. Students in predominantly black colleges rated counseling and advisory services as better planned and more effective than did students in predominantly white schools ($p<.05$). No differences by class year or sex were found.

Insert Table 8 about here

Financial Problems, Family Backing

These two questionnaire items dealt with financial and psychological support. Since both the extent of students' dependence on their families and their financial problems might be expected to change over time, the ANOVA on these two variables also used class year rather than major. No significant differences were found on family backing, and no differences by sex or school were found on financial problems. However, students in their junior year reported significantly fewer financial worries than did students who were sophomores or seniors ($p<.05$).

Insert Table 9 about here

Relative Importance of Problems

The final item of the questionnaire called for Ss to rank their three most serious problems, with a rank of one indicating the problem they felt

interfered most with their academic performance. The twelve problems in the rating scale were listed, and a thirteenth, "Other Personal Problems," was added. Table 10 summarizes these data.

Insert Table 10 about here

In general, inadequate social life and communication problems with instructors were perceived as the most serious problems by female students, while males were more concerned over financial problems and poor study habits. This pattern changed, however, for those black students who were attending predominantly white colleges. Here the problem listed as most serious by males was inadequate social life for most frequent second and third choices. Female students in white colleges listed an inadequate social life as their most serious distraction.

Table 10 also indicates that the lack of a significant difference between groups does not necessarily mean that a particular problem is not a serious one. No significant differences in ratings, for example, were found for financial problems or study habits between students attending the two types of institutions, yet both were ranked as serious problems by male students, particularly those attending black colleges. Conversely, while black students attending white colleges rated competition with other students as significantly greater, competition was not ranked among the three most serious problems by any group. Black students attending white colleges also rated counseling and advisement significantly below the ratings given by those attending black colleges, but did not rank this as a serious problem. Similarly, students attending white colleges saw their courses as less relevant but did not cite irrelevant courses as an

important problem.

Discussion

Black students in predominantly black schools generally gave their schools more favorable ratings on the campus social atmosphere, the adequacy of their social life, relevance of their courses, communications with instructors, and the counseling and advisement provided for them. Possibly for this reason, males, in particular, attending predominantly black colleges were more inclined to attribute their academic difficulties to their own poor study habits and to worries over financial problems, and less likely than those attending predominantly white colleges to blame their difficulties on defects in their schools. Students attending predominantly white colleges were more likely than those attending black colleges to see competition with other students and inadequate high school preparation as sources of academic difficulties.

Apparently the seriousness with which students regard a problem is dependent, in part, on their expectations. While communications between instructors and students was judged poorer in white colleges than in black colleges, students attending predominantly white colleges did not rate this among their three most serious problems. However, for black females attending black colleges communication problems with instructors was most frequently listed as first and second ranked problems. These results suggest, first, that black students attending white colleges anticipate difficulties in communicating with their instructors, and, consequently, do not rate them as a serious problem; second, that one cannot assume black instructors will not have communication problems with their students. Black students encountering such difficulties with black professors may have their expectations violated and, therefore react more

strongly to them.

Female students were inclined to view social and communication problems as contributing most importantly to their academic difficulties, while males more frequently reported being distracted by financial problems or experiencing academic difficulties because of poor study habits. It is possible that families and colleges are more selective in the girls they send or admit, and these girls may be both better prepared and better supported financially.

Noteworthy is the tendency of students to attribute their academic difficulties to non-academic factors; this was particularly true of female students. While males were critical of their own study habits and males attending predominantly white colleges saw an inadequate high school preparation as the most important source of their academic problems, comparatively few students of either sex considered quality of instruction, relevance of courses, and the intellectual atmosphere of the campus as significant factors in their academic problems. This was most often true of students attending predominantly white colleges. For them, the dominating factor was the inadequacy of their social life, and this was apparently perceived as the major source of their academic difficulties. These results may have been due, in part, to the fact that the predominantly white colleges were located in small towns and in semi-rural areas, while the predominantly black colleges were in or near urban centers. Black students from urban homes, like urban whites, may have found small town life less than exciting, quite apart from the other social problems encountered.

Whether their perceptions were entirely accurate, of course, is another matter. Students can be seriously distracted from their studies by unhappiness, social worries or a sense of isolation, even when these arise

out of errors in perception or judgment. A misperception can serve to deflect our energies quite as effectively as can an accurate perception. More importantly, however, misperceptions may cause us to look in wrong places for solutions to our problems.

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Table 1

Analysis of Variance: Competition

Source	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	1	1.79	
School (B)	1	3.50	3.91*
Major (C)	1	1.71	
A x B	1	1.53	
A x C	1	1.79	
B x C	1	0.04	
A x B x C	1	0.00	
Error	281	0.90	

*p<.05

Table 2

Analysis of Variance: High School Preparation

Source	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	1	0.88	
School (B)	1	5.12	5.88*
Major (C)	1	0.76	
A x B	1	0.17	
A x C	1	1.02	
B x C	1	0.11	
A x B x C	1	1.52	
Error	281	0.87	

*p<.05

Table 3

Analysis of Variance: Study Habits

Source	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	1	3.64	4.89*
School (B)	1	2.53	
Major (C)	1	0.01	
A x B	1	1.08	
A x C	1	5.13	6.89*
B x C	1	0.11	
A x B x C	1	2.38	
Error	281	0.74	

*p<.05

Table 4

Analysis of Variance: Communication Problems

Source	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	1	0.08	
School B	1	9.75	9.42*
Major (C)	1	6.68	6.45*
A x B	1	6.24	6.03*
A x C	1	0.30	
B x C	1	0.18	
A x B x C	1	5.78	5.59*
Error	281	1.04	

*$p < .05$

Table 5

Analysis of Variance: Educational Relevance

Source	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	1	0.48	
School (B)	1	22.12	31.94**
Major (C)	1	1.74	
A x B	1	0.56	
A x C	1	4.49	6.48*
B x C	1	7.97	11.51**
A x B x C	1	0.05	
Error	281	0.69	

**p<.01

*p<.05

Table 6

Analysis of Variance: Campus Atmosphere (General)

Source	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	1	3.95	5.48*
School (B)	1	22.56	31.32**
Major (C)	1	0.96	
A x B	1	0.70	
A x C	1	0.02	
B x C	1	0.01	
A x B x C	1	0.07	
Error	281	0.72	

*p<.05

**p<.01

Table 7

Analysis of Variance: Social Life

Source	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	1	8.33	10.40**
School (B)	1	21.97	27.44**
Major (C)	1	0.17	
A x B	1	0.01	
A x C	1	4.81	6.01*
B x C	1	0.05	
A x B x C	1	0.09	
Error	281	0.80	

*p<.05

**p<.01

Table 8

Analysis of Variance: Advisement and Counseling

Source	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	1	0.61	
School (B)	1	5.97	4.96*
Class (C)	2	0.78	
A x B	1	0.67	
A x C	2	0.41	
B x C	2	1.99	
A x B x C	2	0.80	
Error	233	1.20	

*p<.05

Table 9

Analysis of Variance: Financial Problems

Source	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	1	1.29	
School (B)	1	0.07	
Class (C)	2	3.20	3.80*
A x B	1	0.10	
A x C	2	0.16	
B x C	2	2.48	
A x B x C	2	1.18	
Error	233	0.84	

*p<.05

Table 10

Most Serious Problems

Groups Compared	Problem Rank	Problem Choice		X^2
All Males (1) vs. All Females (2)	First	Poor Study Habits (1) 22.1%	Communications (2) 18.6%	22.4*
	Second	Finances (1) 12.8%	Communications (2) 12.1%	8.88
	Third	Communications (1) 14.2%	Personal (2) 18.6%	22.12*
Males--Females Black Colleges (1) vs. Males--Females White Colleges (2)	First	Study Habits (1) 18.5%	Social Life (2) 20.2%	54.77*
	Second	Study Habits (1) 14.4%	Social Life (2) 17.0%	41.75**
	Third	Personal (1) 17.5%	Social Life (2) 23.4%	30.87**

*p<.05

**p<.01

Table 10 (Cont.)

Group Compared	Problem Rank	Problem Choice		X^2
Males, Black Colleges (1) vs. Females, Black Colleges (2)	First	Financial (1) 18.4%	Communications (2) 23.7%	25.18*
	Second	Financial (1) 15.3%	Communications (2) 14.4%	9.15
	Third	Communications (1) 18.6%	Social Life (2) 11.3%	19.32
Males, White Colleges (1) vs. Females, White Colleges (2)	First	H. S. Preparation (1) 15.7%	Social Life (2) 27.9%	15.53
	Second	Social Life (1) 19.6%	Social Life (2) 14.0%	7.74
	Third	Social Life (1) 17.6%	Social Life (2) 30.2%	12.21

*$p < .05$

Figure 1

Questionnaire

1. Competition. In some cases, academic difficulties are due, in part, to the high level of competition from other students. To what extent do you feel that this is true in your case?

1	2	3	4	5
Very seldom; I am as able and well prepared as any of my classmates.	Seldom; I feel few students here are brighter or better prepared.	Competition from other students is a factor, but I am about as capable as the average student here.	Frequently; many of the students here are more able and better prepared than I am.	Nearly always; I usually feel overwhelmed by the competition.

2. Communications problems. Sometimes students feel there is a communications barrier between them and their teachers that creates learning difficulties for them, that even well-prepared teachers fail to "get through" to them or to understand them. Do you think this is a factor in your case?

1	2	3	4	5
Very rarely. I understand my instructors and think they understand me quite well.	Rarely; there are a few misunderstandings.	Often; about half the time we fail to communicate.	Very frequently there is a breakdown in communications.	Nearly always; my instructors and I just don't communicate.

Questionnaire (Cont.)

3. Social life. The campus social life may have an important effect upon one's academic success. Indicate how you feel about the social life on your campus.

1	2	3	4	5
Very inadequate. When I am not studying, there is nothing of a social nature for me to do.	Inadequate; students must provide most of their social life with little support from the college.	Fair; most of the time I am satisfied with the available social activities.	Good; I am quite well satisfied.	Too much social activity. I am distracted from my studies.

4. Family backing. Some families are helpful in encouraging their children; others are indifferent or discouraging. Both of these can affect student achievement. How would you describe your situation?

1	2	3	4	5
Discouraging; my family doesn't really think I belong in school or that college is worth-while.	Indifferent; my family doesn't seem concerned one way or the other.	Average; my family seem to offer about the same amount of encouragement as other students' families.	Very encouraging; my family is very interested in my success and is very willing to help me.	Too much family pressure on me to make good grades.

Questionnaire (Cont.)

5. Financial problems. It is difficult to do your best if you are worrying over financial difficulties. Indicate your situation.

1	2	3	4	5
Very serious financial difficulties. I doubt that I can make it through college.	Serious financial problems. I worry about them but may make it.	Financial problems. I worry sometimes but will very likely solve them.	Once in a while I'm a little short of money, but no serious problems.	No financial problems.

6. Advisement and counseling. Sometimes students get into academic difficulties because they receive poor or inadequate advice about choice of courses or majors or about their personal problems. How adequate has the advice been that you received?

1	2	3	4	5
Very inadequate; I have usually received poor advice or cannot find anyone to advise me.	Inadequate; I have had difficulty finding someone qualified to advise me.	Adequate; about half the time I have been well advised or can find someone to talk with who is qualified.	Good; counseling and advising procedures are well-planned and effective.	Very good; I have been helped a great deal.

Questionnaire (Cont.)

7. Campus atmosphere: Social. Sometimes the general atmosphere of a campus is discouraging and makes it difficult to concentrate on one's studies. Indicate your judgment about the atmosphere on the two scales below.

1	2	3	4	5
Very unfriendly, cold and discouraging. Students are hostile.	Unfriendly; other students don't seem to care whether you live or not.	Average; most students are pleasant but not very concerned about one another.	Friendly; other students are cooperative and interested.	Very friendly; I have many friends and I like it here very much.

8. Campus Atmosphere: Intellectual

1	2	3	4	5
Anti-intellectual atmosphere. No one is really here to study or get an education.	Few serious students here. Most are just wasting their time.	Average; some serious students, some who are not very serious.	Good academic atmosphere; most of the students are here to get an education.	Very intellectual atmosphere. Students place their studies first and work hard.

Questionnaire (Cont.)

9. Quality of instruction. Student ability, motivation and preparation are important for academic success. So is the quality of instruction. How would you rate, on the average, the quality of your instruction?

1	2	3	4	5
Very poor; instructors poorly prepared or indifferent.	Poor.	Average.	Good.	Very good. Well qualified instructors who are very well prepared.

10. High School preparation. Sometimes many able students are handicapped by an inadequate high school background. How adequately did your high school prepare you for college?

1	2	3	4	5
Very inadequately; I was almost completely unprepared.	Inadequately; most of my fellow students are better prepared.	Adequately; I am about as well prepared as the average student here.	Well; I am better prepared than most students here.	Very well; my preparation first-rate.

Questionnaire (Cont.)

11. Educational relevance. It is sometimes difficult to concentrate on courses if they seem to have no importance in our future. How would you rate your courses in this respect?

1	2	3	4	5
Very irrelevant. Most of what I am studying is nonsense.	Mostly irrelevant; most of my courses will not be useful to me.	Fairly relevant; some will be useful, but I am doubtful about others.	Relevant; I think most of my courses deal with important matters.	Very relevant; my courses will be very important to me in my future.

12. Study habits. Sometimes students with considerable ability are handicapped by poor or inefficient study habits. To what extent is this a problem for you?

1	2	3	4	5
A very serious problem; I really don't know how to study.	A problem; I'm not very efficient in my studying.	My study habits are about average compared with other students.	My study habits are quite good; better than average.	I have very good study habits and work very efficiently.